

House Bill 613  
February 20, 2007  
Presented by Chris Smith  
House Fish, Wildlife and Parks Committee

EXHIBIT 1  
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HB 613

Mr. Chairman and committee members, for the record I am Chris Smith, Chief of Staff for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP). I appear in support of HB 613.

Research shows us that exposure to activities, like hunting, at an early age is a significant factor in developing a lasting interest in the activity. In today's society, there are a myriad of activities competing for the time and attention of our youth; both traditional, like hunting and fishing and modern, like video games and iPods. Given the importance of hunting to Montana's culture, heritage and resource management, it is important to provide opportunities for youth to experience hunting in ways that will embed lifelong values related to hunting.

Many Montana youth are exposed to hunting before age 12, when they can obtain their own licenses, by accompanying older family members. This participation as an observer helps create a lifetime interest in hunting. Allowing younger Montanans to experience the full spectrum of hunting would enable some families to take the next step in building future generations of hunters.

Under current law, youth below 12 years of age can legally hunt non-game animals, such as rabbits, gophers or prairie dogs. At age 12, youth who complete a hunter safety instruction course can obtain any hunting license offered by the state and can take all classified game. It is important to note that all youth below 14 years old must be accompanied by a parent or guardian or other adult to carry and use a firearm in public (see 45-8-344, MCA).

HB 613 provides the opportunity for youth aged 9, 10 or 11 to experience hunting of some game animals: upland birds, waterfowl, turkeys and antlerless deer. This is a good mix of animals, yet precludes a number of enforcement issues that could arise if youth could hunt the full range of game animals.

As drafted, HB 613 would exempt youth from taking hunter safety instruction and allow them to hunt under the direct supervision of an adult. While the bill does not preclude youth under 12 from taking hunter education, we believe the bill could be re-worded to place more emphasis on, and an incentive for, taking hunter education. We have worked with the sponsors to develop amendments to that end.

With the amendments we requested, HB 613 would provide two options for families that want to allow their children under 12 to hunt. The first option would be to enroll their child in a hunter education course. Following successful completion of the course, the youth would be able to hunt limited game animals under the direct supervision of their adult "sponsor" without restrictions on firearms.

Alternatively, if the child does not complete hunter education, he or she may still hunt under direct adult supervision, but the youth and adult "sponsor" may only possess one firearm in the field. The purpose for this restriction is to ensure that, in those cases where the youth has not had formal instruction in firearms safety, the adult "sponsor" can focus his or her full attention on that aspect.

FWP currently allows 11-year olds to enroll in hunter education and is comfortable adding 10 year olds to our classrooms. We are concerned that having nine year-olds in classes could change the dynamics and effectiveness of the current program due to differences in age-specific learning styles. This could be addressed by amending HB 613 to limit eligibility to ages 10 and 11. Alternatively, FWP will recommend that 9 year olds, with very few exceptions, hunt only under the second provision in the bill.

Many states and provinces are currently developing new programs to encourage hunter participation. FWP believes that HB 613 is an innovative and attractive alternative for getting kids involved in the outdoors at an early age and supports passage of the bill with our proposed amendments.